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America's Cinderella

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It is part of the American creed, recited subvocally along with the pledge of allegiance in each classroom, that even a poor boy can grow up to become president. The unliberated corollary is that even a poor girl can grow up and become the president's wife. This rags-to-riches formula was immortalized in American children's fiction by the Horatio Alger stories of the 1860s and by the Pluck and Luck nickel novels of the 1920s.

It is little wonder, then, that Cinderella should be a perennial favorite in the American folktale pantheon.

Yet how ironic that this formula should be the terms on which "Cinderella" is acceptable to most Americans. "Cinderella" is *not* a story of rags to riches, but rather riches recovered; *not* poor girl into princess but rather rich girl (or princess) rescued from improper or wicked enslavement; *not* suffering Griselda enduring but shrewd and practical girl persevering and winning a share of the power. It is really a story that is about "the stripping away of the disguise that conceals the soul from the eyes of others. . . ."[1]

[1] Elizabeth Cook *The Ordinary and the Fabulous*

We Americans have it wrong. "Rumpelstiltskin", in which a miller tells a whopping lie and his docile daughter acquiesces in it to become queen, would be more to the point.

But we have been initially seduced by the Perrault cinder-girl who was, after all, the transfigured folk creature of a French literary courtier. Perrault's "Cendrillon" demonstrated the well-bred seventeenth-century female traits of gentility, grace, and selflessness, even to the point of graciously forgiving her wicked stepsisters and finding them noble husbands.

The American "Cinderella" is partially Perrault's. The rest is a spun-sugar caricature of her hardier European and Oriental forbears, who made their own way in the world, tricking the stepsisters with double-talk, artfully disguising themselves, or figuring out a way to win the king's son. The final bit of icing on the American Cinderella was concocted by that master candy-

maker, Walt Disney, in the 1950's. Since then, America's Cinderella has been a coy, helpless dreamer, a "nice" girl who awaits her rescue with patience and a song. This Cinderella of the mass market books finds her way into a majority of American homes while the classic heroines sit unread in old volumes on library shelves.

Poor Cinderella. She has been unjustly distorted by storytellers, misunderstood by educators, and wrongly accused by feminists. Even as late as 1975, in the well-received volume *Womenfolk and Fairy Tales,* Rosemary Minard writes that Cinderella "would still be scrubbing floors if it were not for her fairy godmother." And Ms. Minard includes her in a sweeping condemnation of folk heroines as "insipid beauties waiting passively for Prince Charming."[2]

[2]Rosemary Minard *Womenfolk and Fairy Tales*

Like many dialecticians, Ms. Minard reads the fairy tales incorrectly. Believing—rightly—that the fairy tales, as all stories for children, acculturate young readers and listeners, she has nevertheless gotten her target wrong. Cinderella is not to blame. Not the real, the true Cinderella. Ms. Minard should focus her sights on the mass market Cinderella. She does not recognize the old Ash-girl[3] for the tough, resilient heroine. The wrong Cinderella has gone to the American ball.

[3]There are a number of stories about Ash-boys. For this study, only tales with the heroine have been considered.

The story of Cinderella has endured for over a thousand years, surfacing in a literary source first in ninth century China.[4] It has been found from the Orient to the interior of South America and over five hundred variants have been located by folklorists in Europe alone. This best-beloved tale has been brought to life over and over and no one can say for sure where the oral tradition began. The European story was included by Charles Perrault in his 1697 collection *Histoires ou Contes due temps passé* as "Centrillon". But even before that, the Italian Straparola had a similar story in a collection. Since there had been twelve editions of the Straparola book printed in French before 1694, the chances are strong that Perrault had read the tale *"Peau d'Ane"* (Donkey Skin).[5]

[4]Arthur Waley "The Chinese Cinderella Story"

[5]Marian Roalfe Cox *Cinderella: 349 Variants*

Joseph Jacobs, the indefatigable Victorian collector once said of a Cinderella story he printed that it was "an English version of an Italian adaption of a Spanish translation of a Latin version of a Hebrew translation of an Arabic translation of an Indian original."[6] Perhaps it was not a totally accurate statement of that particular variant, but Jacobs was making a point about the perils of folk tale telling: each teller brings to a tale something of his/her own cultural orientation. Thus in China, where the "lotus foot", or tiny foot was such a sign of a woman's worth that the custom of foot-binding developed, the Cinderella tale lays emphasis on an impossibly small slipper as a clue to the heroine's identity. In seventeenth-century France, Perrault's creation sighs along with her stepsisters over the magnificent "gold flowered mantua" and the "diamond stomacher"[7]. In the Walt Disney American version, both

[6]As quoted in Eileen H Colwell "Folk Literature: An Oral Tradition"

[7] "Cinderilla: or The Little Glass Slipper" in *The Classic Fairy Tales*

movie and book form, Cinderella shares with the little animals a quality of "lovableness"[8], thus changing the intent of the tale and denying the heroine her birthright of shrewdness, inventiveness, and grace under pressure.

[8] Frances Clarke Sayres "Disney Accused". The word "lovableness" is Ms Sayres' and terrifically accurate. The article is a classic.

Notice, though, that many innovations—the Chinese slipper, the Perrault godmother with her midnight injunction and her ability to change pumpkin into coach—become incorporated in later versions. Even a slip of the English translator's tongue (*de vair,* fur, into *de verre,* glass) becomes immortalized. Such cross fertilization in folklore is phenomenal. And the staying power, across countries and centuries, of some of these inventions is notable. Yet glass slipper and godmother and pumpkin coach are not the common incidents by which a "Cinderella" tale is recognized even though they have become basic ingredients in the American story. Rather, the common incidents recognized by folklorists are these: an ill-treated though rich and worthy heroine in Cinders-disguise; the aid of a magical gift or advice by a beast/bird/mother substitute; the dance/festival/church scene where the heroine comes in radiant display; recognition through a token. So "Cinderella" and her true sister tales, "Cap o' Rushes" with its King Lear judgement and "Catskin" wherein the father unnaturally desires his daughter, are counted.

Andrew Lang's judgement that "a naked shoeless race could not have invented Cinderella[9], then, proves false. Variants have been found among the fur-wearing folk of Alaska and the native tribes in South Africa where shoes were not commonly worn.

[9] Marian Roalfe Cox *op. cit.*

"Cinderella" speaks to all of us in whatever skin we inhabit: the child mistreated, a princess or highborn lady in disguise bearing her trials with patience and fortitude. She makes intelligent decisions for she knows that wishing solves nothing without the concomitant action. We have each of us been that child.[10] It is the longing of any youngster sent supperless to bed or given less than a full share at Christmas. It is the adolescent dream.

[10] Even boys and men share that dream. See Walter Scherf "Family Conflicts and Emancipation in Fairy Tales"

To make Cinderella less than she is, then, is a heresy of the worst kind. It cheapens our most cherished dreams, and it makes a mockery of the true magic inside us all—the ability to change our own lives, the ability to control our own destinies.

Cinderella first came to America in the nursery tales the settlers remembered from their own homes and told their children. Versions of these tales can still be found. Folklorist Richard Chase, for example, discovered "Rush Cape"[11] an exact parallel of "Cap o' Rushes" with an Appalachian dialect in Tennessee, Kentucky and South Carolina among others.

[11] Richard Chase *American Folk Tales and Songs*

But when the story reached print, developed, was made literary, things began to happen to the hardy Cinderella.[12] She suffered a seachange, a seachange aggravated by social conditions.

[12] There were already signs of change in the British mass market Cinderella books. See *Aunt Louisa's Favorite Toy Book*

In the 1870's, for example, in the prestigious magazine for children, *St. Nicholas,* there are a number of retellings or adaptations of "Cinderella". The retellings which merely translate European variants contain the hardy heroine. But when a new version is presented, a helpless Cinderella is born. G B Bartlett's "Giant Picture-Book", which was considered "a curious novelty [that] can be produced. . .by children for the amusement of their friends. . ." presents a weepy, prostrate young blonde (the instructions here are quite specific) who must be "aroused from her sad revery" by a godmother.[13] Yet in the truer Cinderella stories, the heroine is not this catatonic. For example, in the Grimm "Cinder-Maid"[14], though she weeps, she continues to perform the proper rites and rituals at her mother's grave, instructing the birds who roost there to:

[13] G B Bartlett "The Giant Picture Book"

[14] "The Cinder-Maid"

> Make me a lady fair to see,
> Dress me as splendid as can be.

And in "The Dirty Shepherdess"[15] a "Cap o' Rushes" variant from France, ". . .she dried her eyes, and made a bundle of her jewels and her best dresses and hurriedly left the castle where she was born." In the *St. Nicholas* "Giant Picture-Book" she has none of this strength of purpose. Rather, she is manipulated by the godmother until the moment she stands before the prince where she speaks "meekly" and "with downcast eyes and extended hand."

[15] "The Dirty Shepherdess"

St. Nicholas was not meant for the mass market. It had, in Selma Lanes' words, "a patrician call to a highly literate readership"[16]. But nevertheless, Bartlett's play instructions indicate how even in the more literary reaches of children's books a change was taking place.

[16] Selma G Lanes *Down the Rabbit Hole*

However, to truly mark this change in the American "Cinderella", one must turn specifically to the mass market books, merchandised products that masquerade as literature but make as little lasting literary impression as a lollipop. They, after all, serve the majority the way the storytellers of the village used to serve. They find their way into millions of homes.

Mass market books are almost as old as colonial America. The chapbooks of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, crudely printed tiny paperbacks, were the source of most children's reading in the early days of our country.[17] Originally these were books imported from Europe. But slowly American publishing grew. In the latter part of the nineteenth century one firm stood out—McLoughlin Bros. They brought bright colors to the pages of children's books. In a series selling for twenty-five cents per book, *Aunt Kate's Series*, bowdlerized folk tales emerged. "Cinderella" was there, along with "Red Riding Hood", "Puss in Boots" and others. Endings were changed, innards cleaned up, and good triumphed with very loud huzzahs. Cinderella is the weepy, sentimentalized pretty girl incapable of helping herself. In contrast, one only has to look at the girl in "Cap o' Rushes"[18] who comes to a great house and asks "Do you want a maid?" and when refused, goes on to say ". . .I ask no

[17] Virginia Haviland *Yankee Doodle's Literary Sampler of Prose, Poetry, and Pictures*

[18] "Cap o' Rushes"

wages and do any sort of work." And she does. In the end, when the master's young son is dying of love for the mysterious lady, she uses her wits to work her way out of the kitchen. Even in Perrault's "Cinderilla"[19], when the fairy godmother runs out of ideas for enchantment and "was at a loss for a coach-man, I'll go and see, says Cinderilla, if there be never a rat in the rat-trap, we'll make a coach-man of him. You are in the right, said her godmother, go and see."

[19] "Cinderilla, or The Little Glass Slipper" *op. cit.*

Hardy, helpful, inventive, that was the Cinderella of the old tales but not of the mass market in the nineteenth century. Today's mass market books are worse. These are the books sold in supermarket and candystore, even lining the shelves of many of the best bookstores. There are pop-up Cinderellas, coloring book Cinderellas, scratch-and-sniff Cinderellas, all inexpensive and available. The point in these books is not the story but the *gimmick*. These are books which must "interest 300,000 children, selling their initial print order in one season and continuing strong for at least two years after that."[20] Compare that with the usual trade publishing house print order of a juvenile book—10,000 copies which an editor hopes to sell out in a lifetime of that title.

[20] Selma Lanes *op. cit.*

All the folk tales have been gutted. But none so changed, I believe, as "Cinderella". For the sake of Happy Ever After, the mass market books have brought forward a good, malleable, forgiving little girl and put her in Cinderella's slippers. However in most of the Cinderella tales there is no forgiveness in the heroine's heart. No mercy. Just justice. In "Rushen Coatie"[21] and "The Cinder-Maid",[22] the elder sisters hack off their toes and heels in order to fit the shoe. Cinderella never stops them, never implies that she has the matching slipper. In fact, her tattletale birds warn the prince in "Rushen Coatie":

[21] "Rushen Coatie"

[22] "The Cinder-Maid"

> Hacked Heels and Pinched Toes
> Behind the young prince rides,
> But Pretty Feet and Little Feet
> Behind the cauldron bides.

Even more graphically, they call out in "Cinder-Maid"

> Turn and peep, turn and peep,
> There's blood within the shoe;
> A bit is cut from off the heel
> And a bit from off the toe.

Cinderella never says a word of comfort. And in the least bowdlerized of the German and Nordic tales, the two sisters come to the wedding "the elder was at the right side and the younger at the left, and the pigeons pecked out one eye from each of them. Afterwards, as they came back, the elder was on the left, and the younger at the right, and then the pigeons pecked out the other eye from each. And thus, for their wickedness and falsehood, they were punished with blindness all their days."[23] That's a far cry from Perrault's

[23] "Cinderella" from *The Complete Grimm's Fairy Tales*

heroine who "gave her sisters lodgings in the palace, and married them the same day to two great lords of the court." And further still from Nola Langner's Scholastic paperback "Cinderella"[24]:

> (The sisters) began to cry.
> They begged Cinderella to forgive them for being so mean to her.
> Cinderella told them they were forgiven.
> "I am sure you will never be mean to me again," she said.
>
> "Oh, never," said the older sister.
> "Never, ever," said the younger sister.

[24] Nola Langner *Cinderella* A fall from grace for Ms. Langner; the pictures in this are still charming.

Missing, too, from the mass market books is the shrewd, even witty Cinderella. In a Wonder Book entitled "Bedtime Stories"[25], a 1940's adaptation from Perrault, we find a Cinderella who talks to her stepsisters "in a shy little voice." Even Perrault's heroine bantered with her stepsisters, asking them leading questions about the ball while secretly and deliciously knowing the answers. In the Wonder Book, however, the true wonder is that Cinderella ever gets to be princess. Even face-to-face with the prince, she is unrecognized until she dons her magic ballgown. Only when her clothes are transformed does the Prince know his true love.

[25] Eleanor Graham *Bedtime Stories*

In 1949, Walt Disney's film, *Cinderella*, burst on to the American scene. The story in the mass market has not been the same since.

The film came out of the studio at a particularly trying time for Disney. He had been deserted by the intellectuals who had been champions of this art for some years.[26] Because of World War II, the public was more interested in war films than cartoons. But when *Cinderella*, lighter than light, was released it brought back to Disney—and his studio—all of his lost fame and fortune. The film was one of the most profitable of all time for the studio, grossing $4.247 million dollars in the first release alone. The success of the movie opened the floodgates of "Disney Cinderella" books.

[26] Richard Schickel *The Disney Version* The critical book on Disney. Witty and wise.

Golden Press's *Walt Disney's Cinderella*[27] set the new pattern for America's Cinderella. This book's text is coy and condescending. (Sample: "And her best friends of all were—guess who—the mice!") The illustrations are poor cartoons. And Cinderella herself is a disaster. She cowers as her sisters rip her homemade ball gown to shreds. (Not even homemade by Cinderella, but by the mice and birds.) She answers her stepmother with whines and pleadings. She is a sorry excuse for a heroine, pitiable and useless. She cannot perform even a simple action to save herself, though she is warned by her friends, the mice. She does not hear them because she is "off in a world of dreams." Cinderella begs, she whimpers, and at last has to be rescued by—guess who—the mice!

[27] Retta S. Worcester and Jane Werner *Walt Disney's Cinderella*

There is also an easy-reading version published by Random House, *Walt Disney's Cinderella.*[28] This Cinderella commits the further heresy of cursing her luck. "How I did wish to go to the ball," she says. "But it is no use. Wishes never come true."

[28] *Walt Disney's Cinderella*

But in the fairy tales wishes have a habit of happening–*wishes accompanied by the proper action,* bad wishes as well as good. That is the beauty of the old stories and their wisdom as well.

Take away the proper course of action, take away Cinderella's ability to think for herself and act for herself, and you are left with a tale of wishes-come-true-regardless. But that is not the way of the fairy tale. As P L Travers so wisely puts it, "If that were so, wouldn't we all be married to princes?"[29]

[29] P L Travers "Only Connect"

The mass market American "Cinderellas" have presented the majority of American children with the wrong dream. They offer the passive princess, the "insipid beauty waiting. . .for Prince Charming" that Rosemary Minard objects to, and thus acculturate millions of girls and boys. But it is the wrong Cinderella and the magic of the old tales has been falsified, the true meaning lost, perhaps forever.

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